

# The INQUIRER £1

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## Faith and light at Lumiere



# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

*Established 1842*

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, 2001*

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**Editor** M Colleen Burns MA  
46A Newmarket Road  
Cringleford  
Norwich NR4 6UF  
ph: 01603 505281  
e: [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com)

**Copyeditor** Sarah Reynolds

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The General Assembly, Essex Hall  
1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

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## Inquiring Words

### PRAISING GOD

*(1 Corinthians 13: 1-3)*

It's fun to stand around praising God  
with your like-minded friends –  
it's easy.

What isn't so easy is to really think  
about what you're doing, to ask if  
all that praising really means anything?  
Couldn't it just be a way of turning  
yourself on, a 'feelgood' drug –albeit  
a safer one than most?

And it isn't easy to really think about  
who or what you're praising.  
Is there anything there, apart from your  
own wishful thinking?  
Isn't all that praising really about *not*  
thinking?

But neither praising nor thinking mean  
anything without loving – which is what  
really matters.

Praising without loving is empty noise.  
Thinking without loving is soulless calculation.  
So let's praise God and think and love –  
but above all, love.

Now let's all take time to think about that,  
and praise God that we can!

– *Cliff Reed*

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# What is there left to believe in?

By Claire MacDonald

When my niece Danielle was little, she taught herself to read, and she did it like this. She would ask us to tell her the names of the letters she could see from her pushchair, and she would then look for them in the words around us everyday – S, T, A, E, O, P. She saw letters as her *friends*. There is friend S, she would say, and there's friend A and friend T, and she would read out strings of them until she realised that her letter friends were doing something together they could not do apart – they made meaning. Her joy and surprise when friend S and friend T and friend O and friend P made *stop* was infectious. It was a miracle, or at least a revelation. In her imagination it was as if her letter friends had decided to get together and talk to one another, and from that conversation they made meanings that were so much more than what those letters meant when they stood apart.

Making meaning is our response to the human condition. Together we make and remake meanings from arbitrary symbols that become a connected layered weave, never finished, and always in need of repair. Languages, laws and experiments, dances and musical cultures come together through our ability to practise sharing ideas. That commitment to meaning-making is what makes me a person of faith. For as long as we *have* faith the future of meaning is in our hands. When we are people of faith, and we have hope, that thing with feathers perches in the soul, as the poet Emily Dickenson put it.

Problem is that hope is covered in a deluge of war and catastrophe. Has been for some time.

The image on the right is a print by the artist Paul Klee from 1920. The German writer Walter Benjamin bought it in 1921 and then wrote of the image years later, just before his own death. He said of this strange image that it depicted the angel of history looking back:

*Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage, and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what had been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm propels him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

While the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

In 1975 the Jesuit theologian and social thinker Ivan Illich coined the term 'tools for conviviality'. Actually he wrote a whole book called *Tools for Conviviality* about the difference between tools that allow our humanity and our autonomy to flourish, and tools that lay waste to the world, 'make that pile of debris grow ever skyward'.

Tools for conviviality are those tools that work without power, without dehumanising one another. Tools need to be repairable and durable and widely usable, robust, simple, environmentally friendly and they might be soft tools – as well



Paul Klee's 1920 painting of an angel. Walter Benjamin said of it: 'A storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.' Public Domain via Wikimedia

## Lumiere encouraged connection

Held in November, Durham Lumiere 2017 was a citywide arts event commissioning artists and community groups to make large scale installations with light. The entire city was filled with lights of all kinds – from a projected winking moon, to the entire cathedral whose projected light pulsed to live bell ringing.

Exhilarating and bonding for the entire community, the commissioning body, Artichoke, invited speakers to a conference to open the event. 'Who are we and where are we headed?' included scientists and social activists, theologians and games makers from all over the world.

I spoke on the first panel, 'What's left to believe in?' and was very pleased to be involved and to be able to speak as a Unitarian about connection, community and conversation. My co-panellists were the Very Rev'd Andrew Temlett, from the cathedral, Sebastian White, from CERN, and our Chair, Charles Fernyhough, a psychologist whose research includes spirituality. We found ourselves in agreement, so much so that after our panel we spent a further hour together in animated and very convivial conversation. My hope is that as Unitarians we can be part of further conversations such as this. My talk is reproduced here.

– Claire MacDonald

(Continued on next page)







# A connection based on language

(Continued from previous page)

looking man is still leaning forward intently – and then suddenly he speaks. And he speaks not in English but in what is clearly the language of the phone call because the suited man snaps to attention, whips round and puts down his bags and, as the other rises and moves towards him, he steps forward and folds him into his arms in an embrace that brings tears to my eyes – and no one else appears to notice. And the embrace – if I could describe it. It is like ... a mother greeting her long lost son; brothers separated by war; the prodigal son. They laugh, they hug, they touch each other's arms, they hold each other in a long handshake. And just as suddenly, it's over. Train stops, the doors open. Mobile phone man picks up his bags and steps out.

No phone numbers, no mobile numbers are exchanged.

I carry that story; I have told it several times. A story of loss, love, joy, of the ragged inheritance of the past. We live on the moving edge of being, between freedom and belonging. We need both. Most of all we need tools for conviviality. We need each other: letter friends, men on trains, oil pipeline protesters, birds of hope. As the poet Marge Piercy says in her poem *The Art of Blessing the Day*:



Claire MacDonald (second from left) participated in a forum, 'What's Left to Believe in?' with the Very Rev'd Andrew Temlett, Sebastian White, from CERN, and the chair, Charles Fernyhough, a psychologist whose research includes spirituality.

*What we want to change we curse and then pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can with eyes and hands and tongue. If you can't bless it, get ready to make it new.*

The Rev Claire MacDonald is minister with Lewisham Unitarians. This talk was first given as part of the Lumiere Durham conference 2017, produced by Artichoke. [www.lumiere-festival.com](http://www.lumiere-festival.com)

## Hucklow Summer School 2018

For Personal and Leadership Development

### 'How, Then, Shall We Live?'

Living, Dying, and Considering Our Legacy



18<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> August 2018

The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire

Applications due by 30<sup>th</sup> March 2018

Allocation of places will be confirmed in May 2018

Hucklow Summer School: Part of the GA of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, Registered Charity: No. 250788

Hucklow Summer School brings fellow Unitarians together and allows them to get to know each other deeply and form lasting connections. The core purpose of summer school week is religious education: we focus on matters of religion and spirituality and intend to draw out and develop the potential of all participants. We aim to provide a carefully balanced programme, offering a rich mix of activities for both the heart and head, and a wide variety of optional sessions including country walks, poetry, discussions and crafts, which participants might 'take home' and try out in their own congregations and communities. We also ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for relaxed fellowship and fun during the week!

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'Crossing and Dwelling: Marking Paths and Making Places'  
with Claire MacDonald and Mark Stewart

'The Soulful Road'

with Kate Dean and Elizabeth Harley

'Tell Them Stories and Everything will be Well'  
with Dot Hewerdine and Katie McKenna

'A Journey through the Valley of the Shadow:  
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with Danny Crosby and Jef Jones

Children and Young People's Programme  
with Claire Maddocks and Izzy Rosenberg

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[www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk](http://www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk)

Alternatively, please telephone Janet Costley on 01732 464211.



# Even in a free faith we need

By Phillip Hewett

The last day of 2017 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my joining the Unitarians. Like most of my teen-age peers I was abandoning the religious affiliation of my upbringing, but unlike them I had been looking for a viable alternative, and had been exploring the options in the reference books available to me. What I found led me to write to Essex Hall for literature, which not only showed that I was on the right path but also gave me the address of the nearest minister, G Randall Jones in Bridport, 15 miles away. I wrote to ask if I could come and talk with him, and he replied that this would not be necessary, since he could call on me. So we sat and talked for an hour or so, at the end of which I asked him what I had to do to become a Unitarian, expecting to be told of initiation procedures. His response was surprising: 'You won't need to become a Unitarian, because after listening to you, I can tell you that you have already done so.'

## Already a Unitarian

So I had become a Unitarian before I had ever, to my knowledge, met a real-live one. When I told the vicar of my former church what I was doing, he said I had a 'grasshopper mind', ready to jump according to each new influence that came my way. Certainly there are such grasshoppers. I have seen some of them hop through congregations I have served – very enthusiastic for a while until some new enthusiasm takes over. But I am still a Unitarian. I have changed, of course, over the years, and so has the Unitarian movement changed, but those changes have not pushed us apart. As I look back now, one or two of them stand out.

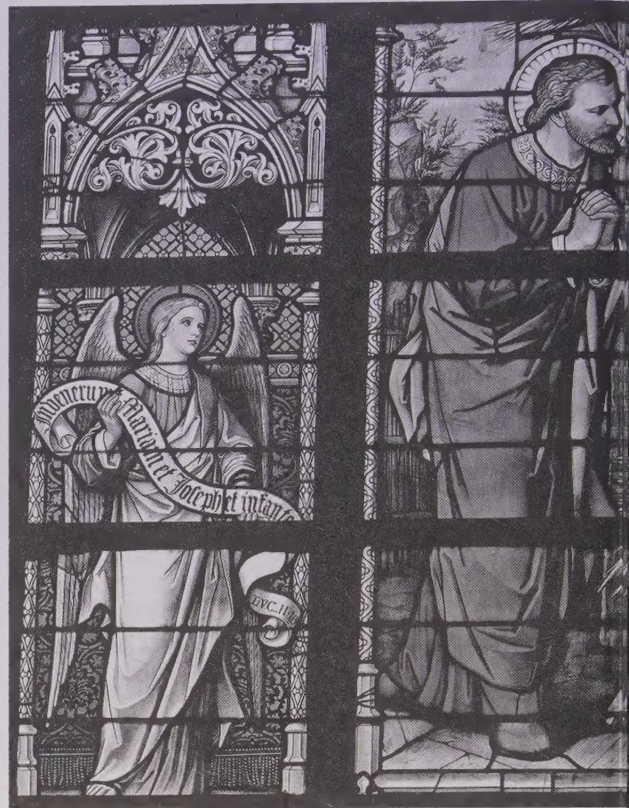
Although what had first prompted my dissatisfaction with my former church was a feeling that it was leaving me spiritually empty, it was not long before I realised that my problem was intellectual – I was being required to believe things that I didn't really believe. The traditional Western approach to religion has been that its primary feature is this intellectual process of believing. Those with a religious commitment are simply called 'believers'. Becoming a Unitarian had not liberated me from this, for there was the same emphasis on believing, or often, disbelieving.

## What is a belief?

The most prominent Unitarian book of that period was called *The Beliefs of a Unitarian* (though I should add that Randall Jones had written a book entitled *Christian Experience*). The question that came my way most frequently from people who heard of my change was 'What do Unitarians believe?' Or I was charged with being an unbeliever. A religious community was assumed to be united by shared beliefs, in a way that would not be expected of other types of community, like the crew of a ship or a tennis club. What is a belief, anyway? Just because such a word can be bandied around it doesn't mean that it stands for a separate entity. It is more like a jump or a yawn – a way of describing a particular form of human behaviour, in this case intellectual behaviour.

Byron wrote: ... *I do believe  
Though I have found them not, that there may be  
Words which are things.*

But many people think they have found them, and that a belief is a thing, just as a bead is a thing, and as beads can be strung together to form a necklace irrespective of who wears it, so beliefs can be strung together to form a doctrine or creed.



Unitarians have rejected the idea of creeds, but it has taken longer to escape the older view of beliefs. It took me a long time but by the time I wrote my last book *The Unitarian Way* I had completed the process. The word 'way' has the connotation of walking together and also has a long history in religious usage. The earliest Christians referred to their religion as 'the Way' (Acts 9:23), while it is the accepted English translation of the Chinese *Tao*, the ultimate mystery of being. Believing as an intellectual process has its place in religion, but not as the foundation.

## 'Unitarian' as an adjective

Another major Unitarian change is also in large measure a reflection of the context within which the evolution has taken place. Seventy-five years ago that context was almost exclusively Christian. Both in Britain and in Canada one often heard the claim 'This is a Christian country'. Official forms asked you to enter your Christian name and your surname. The word 'multiculturalism' had not yet been coined. There was a long tradition of using 'Unitarian' simply as an adjective; the sub-heading of *The Inquirer* announced it as 'the organ of Unitarian Christianity and Free Religious Fellowship'. 'Are Unitarians Christians?' was a subject for perennial debate, with most mainstream Christians saying no and most Unitarians saying yes, each defining the terms to suit their own position. Change here has been obvious, with many Unitarians today feeling alienated from Christianity or even hostile to it.

Where does this leave us? How do we define our identity? In the USA there was a great turning point in 1961 when the Unitarians merged with the Universalists to form a new religious body, and this was followed by two decades of sometimes frantic search for identity. It was eventually resolved by adoption of a covenant to affirm and promote Seven Principles, which are now venerated in the same way as mainstream Christians have venerated the Ten Commandments. But these principles were not seen as free



# ies, and Jesus still beckons



ating and detached from history; they were drawn from what is called a 'living tradition', although this was certainly a very bad definition of tradition. The usual metaphor for a tradition is that of a flowing stream, but in this case a trackless ocean would be more appropriate, or even, more unkindly, a swamp. History shows no successful examples of religions based on embodied principles, though there were attempts to devise some in the 18th and 19th centuries. All the great religions are built around persons and stories, poetry and place; some in fact are named after persons.

## Devotion to principles a real alternative

British Unitarians underwent no such break with history as the Americans did in 1961, but there seems to have been the same search for identity and unifying principles. Among Unitarians everywhere, historical continuity has been maintained through persons and stories. In Transylvania they speak of Francis David and what he said almost as though they had known him personally, while on Founder's Day among the Khasi Hills Unitarians in India pictures of Hajom Kissor Singh are garlanded with flowers.

My own personal evolution has moved through all these phases. Back in 1956 I wrote in my book *An Unfettered Faith* that 'although devotion to a person has been central in many religious traditions, devotion to principles offers a very real, though perhaps more difficult, alternative.' Commenting on this, a ministerial colleague, Joyce Hazlehurst, said: 'At any time and in any community the number of people who think in concepts, abstract terms, is relatively small. I think it always will be... Principles alone may and do arouse the devotion of those who think habitually in concepts. But the contention is that for the common run of [people], principles, embodied from personality, do not move the will to action. The word must take flesh and dwell among us, otherwise we do not see the glory.'

Looking back now, I feel she was absolutely right, and would

add only that we need stories as well as persons and that the two usually go together. But coming back to the relationship of Unitarians to Christianity, one is considering not how one responds to persons in general, but to one particular person, Jesus of Nazareth. On this question, we cannot think we start with a blank slate and ignore the fact that, as Emerson reminded his Unitarian hearers so long ago, the name of Jesus is not so much written as ploughed into history. Around him the greatest literature, art and music have been gathered, from which we too draw inspiration. And to heed his simple call: 'Follow me!' is to set out on a path essentially the same as the one indicated by other prophets of world religion. As to whether this is called 'Christian' is simply a terminological issue.

Another change that has taken place within my living memory has been in the model used to understand the basic nature of reality and our place in it. For centuries this was the model of the great chain of being, which put everything in one ascending line. At the lowest level was inanimate matter: rocks and minerals. Next came the most primitive forms of life. Then onward and upward through plants and animals to human beings, and continuing upward through angels and archangels to the Supreme Being, God Almighty. It was pictured memorably in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, with us humans 'Placed on an isthmus in a middle state.'

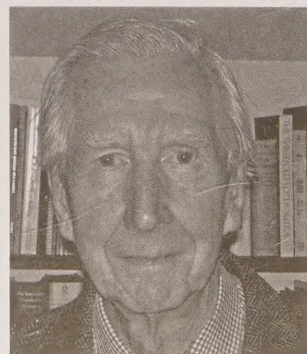
## Humans went from isthmus to apex

Unitarians inherited this traditional view, though with an increasing degree of scepticism about the angels and archangels, eventually extending to God Almighty as well. This had the effect of cutting off the top of the great chain, so that we humans were no longer on an isthmus in a middle state but at the apex. This was called humanism, and it had a tremendous impact upon our movement in the middle years of the 20th century. In one of the most widely circulating humanist pamphlets of that period the author complained that humanists were being accused of not believing in a Supreme Being, whereas they did indeed believe in a Supreme Being: Man. And it did seem for a while as though human control over nature would transform the world for the better.

Then came the crash, as the unforeseen side-effects of this so-called mastery began to make themselves apparent, with the result that most Unitarians hastened to join in the general abandonment of the hierarchical model of the great chain, and replaced it by the alternative one originally proposed by Charles Darwin, that of the interdependent web.

There have been other changes, of course, but these are perhaps the most important ones. Change will continue; new paths will be opened. But as Ramakrishna said long ago, there are many paths up the mountain, but the nearer they get to the summit, the more closely they converge.

*The Rev Dr Phillip Hewett is minister emeritus at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He was minister of the Ipswich Unitarian Congregation (1954-56).*





# Joan Cook to be 2018 GA president

## 1. General Assembly President and Vice-President

The Executive Committee is pleased to announce that Joan Cook will be nominated for the position as President of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches for the year commencing 7 April 2018 and that Rev Celia Cartwright will be nominated for the position of Vice-President in 2018-19, leading to the Presidency in 2019-2020. We congratulate Joan and Celia and thank them for agreeing to serve.



Joan Cook

Joan became a member of St Mark's Church, Edinburgh, in 1981 and has undertaken many roles within the congregation. She has served on the Executive Committee of the Scottish Unitarian Association, including three years as President, and her national roles include two terms as a member of the Executive Committee.

Celia served as a Lay Leader in Charge and Lay Pastor in Devon and then as a Minister at Padiham (1997-98) Rochdale (1998-2006) and Kendal (2006-16). She is currently national President of the Women's League, Treasurer of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship and a Tutor on the Worship Studies course.

## 2. Honorary Membership of the General Assembly

The Executive Committee is pleased to announce that Rev Dr Ann Peart and Alan Ruston will be nominated as Honorary Members of the General Assembly at the Annual Meetings in April 2018 in recognition of their considerable contribution to the Unitarian cause worldwide. Honorary Membership is awarded only to those who have rendered long and highly significant service nationally.

Ann was active as a young person at Hyde Chapel, East Cheshire including leading worship. After training at Manchester College Oxford she served as minister at Lewisham (1986-95) and Gorton, Manchester (1995-2000) and then as Principal of Unitarian College Manchester (2000-09). She has served on many national Unitarian bodies. She completed a PhD on Women and Unitarianism and was President of the General Assembly in 2012-13.

Alan was President of the General Assembly in 2002-03 and has served the national movement in many capacities, including as Chair of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association Incorporated. He has been researching the history of British Unitarianism for nearly 50 years and is a former President of the Unitarian Historical Society.

## 3. Executive Committee Co-option

The Executive Committee has co-opted Hilda Dumbleton to replace Gwynn Pritchard who resigned in July 2017 due to ill health. Hilda has been a Lay Preacher in the South East Wales District since 1975 and has served her congregation, Swansea, in many capacities. She was District President in 1993-94 and is a member of the Welsh Department. Hilda will serve until April 2019.

## 4. Training and Education Development (TED) Project

The Executive Committee was encouraged by the progress report that was presented. The Governance Group had met twice to get the project up-and-running and to ensure that a pilot programme for Ministry training is in place by Autumn 2018. Work had taken place on developing a draft curriculum

for the 'continuing deepening of the Unitarian life' with the Competencies for Ministry being reflected in a matrix of skills, behaviours and attitudes. Work is also taking place on mapping lay training courses. An assessment group has been established.

The Governance Group has considered how the new Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) that is to be established will fulfil Charity Commission objectives. It is intended to launch the CIO at the Annual Meetings in April 2018.

## 5. Management Accounts 2016-17

The Executive Committee received the initial management accounts for the financial year, ending 30 September 2017 and was pleased to be informed that income and expenditure were well under control – producing a balanced position with a reduction in drawdown from the Bowland Trust donation.

The Chief Officer reported that a legacy of £35,000 had recently been received for the unrestricted use of the General Assembly which will support activities in the current financial year.

## 6. Penal and Social Affairs

The Executive Committee has agreed to the current Penal Affairs Panel widening its role to include social issues. The Panel remains committed to addressing concerns about the penal system but has acknowledged that these challenges often reflect social problems, such as drug misuse. Its title will therefore be changed to the 'Penal and Social Affairs Panel'. The Panel will be undertaking a 'Social Responsibility Survey' of Unitarian communities and individual Unitarians and will expand its publications, including more articles in *The Inquirer* on its work. Members were thanked for their contribution.

## 7. Growth and 2020 Congregational Development

Growth is one of the 'Next Steps' priorities and the Rev Andy Pakula and Aleks Zglinska of the 2020 Leadership Team joined the meeting along with Simon Bland, Ministry and Congregational Support Officer, to consider how the General Assembly might support the growth of the Unitarian movement. All recognised that this was a complex issue requiring a range of steps addressing different impediments to growth. Further work on strategy and implementation is planned.

## 8. Gábor Kereki Trust

In June 2017 the General Assembly received a legacy from the Estate of Mrs Joan Kereki to establish a Trust in memory of her husband, Rev Gábor Kereki, to benefit ministers and ministerial students from the Hungarian Unitarian Church attending Harris Manchester College, Oxford and Unitarian College Manchester.

Unitarian College Manchester have been working with HMCO to bring a 'Sharpe Scholar' to Britain in early 2018 and financial support from the Fund will enable the Rev Dr Enikő Ferenczi to come to England from mid-January 2018 until the General Assembly Annual Meetings, which she will attend. She will also attend the Festival of Unitarians in the South East (FUSE) and take opportunities to join worship in Unitarian congregations.

## 9. Annual Meetings 2018 Video

Come to Staverton Estate for the Annual Meetings in April 2018 – find out more by watching this new video [https://youtu.be/3l\\_R4Tk\\_wUg](https://youtu.be/3l_R4Tk_wUg)

## 10. Update General Assembly Roll of Ministers – Rev Andy Phillips

We are pleased to announce that the Rev Andy Phillips, having completed the academic requirements of his training, has been admitted to the Roll of Ministers with Probationary status.



# *It's a wonderful funny old life*



Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed starred in 'It's a Wonderful Life' Public Domain/Wikimedia Commons

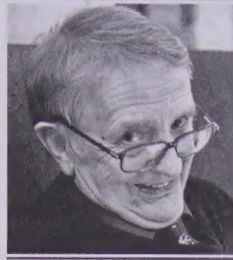
As a lifelong churchgoer, I admit to some discomfort as I confess that on the morning of Sunday, 24 December I went to the cinema. Yes, a Sunday morning, and I went to 'the pictures' as we called it in my childhood, or 'the movies' as they say in the US. It felt strange, and I wondered if others in the cinema queue felt the strangeness. And did the members of the church I normally attend notice my absence? What would they have thought had they known where I was?

Not for the first time, our local cinema was showing *It's a Wonderful Life* as a special feature for the morning of Christmas Eve. I had seen it on Christmas Eve of the previous year, so why go again? Several reasons. It had the feel of a local community event, with a Christmas buzz in the air, with cheery chatter and smiles as the cinema manager handed out homemade mince pies for all as we streamed in. It is an old, black and white film, so I had expected the audience to be adults of my generation on a trip down memory lane. But no, there were children and teenagers present, several with large buckets of popcorn. I'm sure that many local churches would have been glad to have such a large gathering, though perhaps without the popcorn.

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Another reason for attending was curiosity. This is a rather mysterious film. It has an implausible plot with a supernatural element to it, conveyed in a sequence of improbable events, including a visit from an angel, in wintry weather. One could, of course, say the same about the Christmas story, which is, at least on the surface, quite inappropriate fare for down-to-earth Unitarians.

At Christmas, however, we are encouraged to set aside cold reason and give free rein to matters of the heart. This is what *It's a Wonderful Life* does, so I was interested to view it again, to see how and why it works its charm. It certainly did just that and the cinema audience responded with tears of joy and applause. There are plenty of people in the world who respond



## Funny Old World

By John Midgley

to the film's message: that life is a gift, is worth living and one person can make a difference. Merry Christmas!

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When I mentioned my Sunday absence to a friend in the congregation I attend and described the film to her, she said, 'Well, it sounds like a very religious film.' Words of forgiveness, perhaps, for my having played truant. I was glad to hear them. I have also wondered whether there is a political element to the film with a contemporary relevance and perhaps that is why it is enjoying something of a revival. The hero is a key figure in a building and loan company (a building society). He makes sacrifices for the sake of his family and community and works hard to enable ordinary people to get a decent roof above their heads. The 'baddie' in the story is a flint-hearted capitalist type, who is neither converted like Scrooge, nor does he get an obvious 'comeuppance'. To the sound of 'Hark the Herald', the good guy wins through.

Knowing the widespread agonising over the present state of the western world's economies, the struggles of the poor and the gulf between them and the rich, I wondered if the audience felt encouragement in the film's message. I hope they did.

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It had a very welcome, cheering effect on me. I am among many who look back over 2017 with much despair. One of my colleagues commented, 'The world is going to hell in a hand-cart!' Another, in his Christmas letter, described 2017 as 'the year from hell'. It would be easy to find examples of the hellishness of much that has happened and speculate that 2018 is not going to be much better. So, I was grateful for the film's reminder that life is good, and that one person can make a valid contribution to the ongoing goodness.

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I have been looking around for examples of positive news. One factor in the current climate that I would be interested to learn more about concerns churchgoing. I understand that in North America, in times of stress and crisis, there is often a growth in church attendance. I gather this is happening now, much of it in response to some of the unacceptable utterances of President Trump. On our side of the Atlantic, the result of the referendum has shocked and churned up the feelings of the nation. Whatever side you may be on, dear reader, you will surely agree that 'Brexit and all that' has split our nation and stirred an unacceptable level of divisiveness. Has it brought increased churchgoing in the UK, I wonder?

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(Continued on next page)



When dreams come to guide us

# How hearing Dr King changed me

Monday is Dr Martin Luther King's 87th birthday. To mark the occasion, **Ian Cameron** recalls being at the March on Washington and the effect it had on his young life.

I was 20 years old when I went to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. I went with my best friend Jeremy Taylor, travelling in the most disreputable and rusty Jeep I've ever seen. Across the Green Mountains, via Boston, and down to New York, we went off, to 'look for America'. And we found it: in Harlem I looked after the Jeep while piles of newspaper blew around the streets, and a lot of cool cats yelled and jived and strutted their stuff. I was scared, a stranger in a strange land. And then in Delaware we passed the flatbed trucks taking young black men, no older than me, to pick the crops in the fields. I reckon I wouldn't have lasted one day in their shoes; and I wonder how many of those men are alive, as I write this, 54 years later.

Washington was hot and humid, oppressive, the air almost liquid. I couldn't breathe and I was exhausted and depressed from the journey. I saw posters in suburban gardens saying the March was not the 'American Way'. I saw the massive Black ghetto, the unseen, denied underbelly of the nation's capital. And I saw the city-centre park, with dozens of horse drawn wagons pulled up into campsite circles. Those folk had walked all the way from the South, a wagon train along the highways to Washington. I'd never seen anything like it. But then again, there had never *been* anything like it. A sense gradually grew in me: my fear and exhaustion and sense of alienation from America began to be replaced by a sense of

wonder. Whatever was about to happen would change me, if not the world, forever.

On 28 August, 1963, the day of the march, the Unitarian-Universalists formed up, my youth group with them, and we processed up the side of the reflecting pool singing and chanting "We Shall Overcome" and carrying our banner. Under the trees we sat down, and then everything went quiet. As the entertainers and the speeches started, I could hear the breeze in the leaves above. A quarter of a million people were there, focussed on the Lincoln Memorial, as the ceremony unfolded. Peace was in the air; I could hear it.

Now, of course I'd heard about Martin Luther King. I knew he was one of the good guys - Pete Seeger and Joan Baez and Bob Dylan - against racism. MLK, a follower of Gandhi, supporter of the Freedom Riders. I listened that day to Joan and Bob, and they were good, but it wasn't until Mahalia Jackson sang that the magic began.

Mahalia was a gospel singer. I was a Unitarian; I'd left all that religion and gospel stuff behind. So when she sang "I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned", and my heart swelled and I found tears in my eyes, I guess my head was saying to my heart, "What the hell is going on here?!" And then Rev. King came on, and began his speech.

Now, I don't know if you've ever seen the transcript of the whole speech King made. It was and is a good speech, carefully worded and well argued, saying that slavery had ended 100 years before, but that the US had given black folks a dud cheque. A century, and still no freedom, no equality. Great stuff.

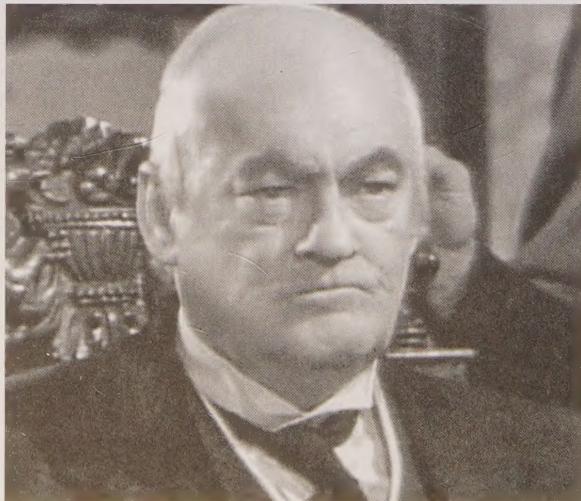
But King was speaking just in front of Mahalia Jackson, and as he reached the climax of his speech, she sang out from 'the amen corner'. Southern Baptist style, she repeated his words,

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## *It's a wonderful funny old life*

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The cheeriest news that has come my way is from Wales. Congratulations to Melda Grantham, secretary of the Unitarian Welsh Department, for bravely declaring 2017 a brilliant year for Welsh Unitarians. No doubt she had in mind the unforgettable presentation they delivered at the opening ceremony at April's Unitarian General Assembly Meetings, followed by other lively events this past year. Or was it the wedding of their much-loved minister Wyn Thomas who, having fended off serious illness, gives us the opportunity to send congratulations to him and his husband Matthew? *Mae cariad yn ennill*. Or is it that Melda is training for the Unitarian ministry and loving every minute of it? *Pob lwc!*



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Following the Christmas Eve cinema visit, it was back home in time for the compulsory listen to the Nine Lessons and Carols Service from Kings College Chapel. In the evening we joined the throng at our local parish church for yet more carols. Three renditions in one day of *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* brought redemption, I hope, for my cinema going. Not that I really feel it is a sin, any day of the year.

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*

*Photo left: Lionel Barrymore played Mr Potter in 'It's a Wonderful Life' - a villainous character which may be just as relevant today.*



# Mahalia Jackson inspired dream

*(Continued from previous page)*

agreed, encouraged King to trust his message and his voice. 'Tell them about your dream, Martin,' she cried. And he left his script, and gave the words which have lived on to this day:

'I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." ....

'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

'I have a *dream* today!'

Now, I was more or less an atheist. My father had left behind his Scots Presbyterian upbringing. So why was a Baptist minister so influential that I have, in effect, spent a lifetime learning to live the truth of which he spoke so movingly?

Well, first, I had despaired up to that point that anything I could say or do would really make a difference. Against the bullies and the warmongers and the politicians, I felt impotent. I was the boy who, in Harlem, hid down in the rusty old jeep. I was the college kid who watched the field hands in Delaware and knew I wouldn't last a day in their shoes. I belonged to a nice liberal youth group, and that was good, but not enough. Whatever I did with my life, I could not ignore Martin Luther King's dream, because it was there in my heart too.

The second thing turns on that word, "dream".

Some years ago I had a dream: *a black man stops me on the street, and tries to sell me a golden ring. But I am afraid it is a stolen ring, and try to get away from the insistent and frightening black man.* Working on this, it came to me that only when I accepted my inner black man would I stop oppressing the unknown and rejected parts of myself. Racism, I found, is projection of our own darkness onto others. So it is not only a social injustice, but is also oppression of our own spirits. We all need to accept the gold ring the unconscious offers us.

So, when Mahalia Jackson sang back to him the music of what Martin Luther King was trying to say, then he embodied



*The Rev Dr Martin Luther King, speaking at the March on Washington. US National Archives photo via Wikimedia Commons*

the music and reached me and a quarter of a million others. From this I learned that I too have to sing. And when my dream rose spontaneously out of my unconscious to guide me about my inner truth, then I was free to become a more whole person. It all really started with the day I listened to Martin Luther King, and, of course, the goddess who urged him to sing, Mahalia Jackson.

We will, in admitting that "we have a dream - and many nightmares" find our way to grow sustainably and justly, once again.

*Ian Cameron is a member of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel, Norwich.*

## Golders Green ritual offers a balance of values

*Wade Miller-Knight describes a ritual he designed for a recent service at his church – Golders Green Unitarians.*

A table centrepiece covered by green tree-branches thick with leaves was the unusual focus of the circle of seats. The branches were for a participatory activity, where everyone was invited to engage with the question:

*What good qualities do you value in yourself and others?*

All were invited to name a human quality they particularly appreciated – creativity, empathy, fairness... and select a branch from a choice of a dozen species, which they then put into a basket (initially on the table empty): symbolically as a gift to the Greater Wholeness as they perceive it – God, Goddess, Nature, etc.

I, as worship leader, quickly wrote each favoured quality on post-it notes, which increasingly spread over the table – their bright pink contrasting with the remaining yet-to-be-used deep green branches.

Enthusiasm swelled as honesty, love, tolerance, courage, humility, compassion, kindness, respect, appreciating

differing opinions, self-acceptance (and accepting others, too), gratitude, humour, reliability, fun, and tact, were all added to the values blessed as aspects of 'Spiritually Balanced Living' – the service title advertised on an A-board in the street – with several people coming back to the table for a second cherry (or lilac, larch, plum....).

In the Address that followed, I rounded up our exploration of good qualities, describing three commitments which have helped me and could, I hoped, help others similarly to live their own valued qualities more fully: deepening our personal spiritual life, in particular by daily meditation; consciously practising the quality we are keen to have more of; and spending time with people who've already got that quality in their own way of being.

*Wade Miller-Knight is a member and occasional service leader at Golders Green Unitarians. If there are rituals, ideas or other ways your congregation deepens your worship experience, please write an article and share it with the denomination. – ed.*



# Now, about those resolutions

*A couple of weeks ago you, no doubt, made New Year Resolutions. But have you made some for your congregation? Here are a few suggestions from Doris:*

As a congregation, your first resolution must be to twin your toilet if you have not already done this. You did read Kate Dean's splendid article in the 4 November *Inquirer*, didn't you?

Number 2 is to enter any on-going social actions on the GA website. <http://bit.ly/2CPNQTD> (Or, go to [www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/social-justice](http://www.unitarian.org.uk/pages/social-justice) and click on the link near the map.)

The third is, as always, to write in to *The Inquirer* or *The Unitarian* (TI/TU) magazines with news of what you are doing. But as Paul at Padiham pointed out you can't expect either of these periodicals to keep a permanent 'News from Padiham (or wherever)' column going.

So number four is to work out some way of putting the news of what you are doing in a format that can be easily seen by everyone without having to search for it. My suggestions for an email network have been thoroughly dissed (as der yoof would say). So come up with a better one. It is not a question, necessarily, of informing people who might come to your events, though that is clearly an important part. It also serves to show how busy and lively we are, and, I hope, counteract to some extent the tendency to moan on and on about how we are dying. It would also, as I have said before, many times, many, many times, possibly provide a source of good ideas to other congregations.



Number five is, yes, you've guessed it, talk to each other. Have church meetings. Have short snappy ones on different issues. Don't make people sit in their pews while a small number drone on and on. Don't, what ever you do, call it an AGM or an EGM. Call it 'The Upper Pocklington Toilet Twinning Five minute Speak Out'. Not that we at UPUC would dream of speaking of anything so indelicate as a ...

6. I hope you had a lovely Christmas. Lots of you had Carol Concerts so pics in TI/TU, short videos on UK Unitarians – quality is fairly irrelevant, the computer screen is small and the sound not that terrific. Some of you had Christmas Tree Festivals, not just a pic, but a few words, ditto. If you did something completely different, then a full write-up, please.

Number 7. Did you do as I told you to do and send Christmas cards to all your local faith groups? If not, why not? If you did, what was the outcome? We want to know.

Merry 2018.

*Dorothy Haughton is a Unitarian worship leader based in Wales.*

## June Pettitt retires from Underbank



*Pictures show the chapel chairperson, Karen Allison, presenting June with a canvas montage of photos of the chapel, its surroundings and its congregation, and of June and Mike Pettitt (left) cutting the celebratory cake. Their presents also included a voucher for a stay at a hotel in York.*

*Thank you for all you have done for Underbank, June, and happy retirement.*

*(Photos by Dave Allison)*

*On Sunday, 19 November, the Rev June Pettitt celebrated her recent retirement from Underbank Chapel, Sheffield, where she served for the past 11 years. A splendid buffet lunch was held in the chapel schoolroom shortly after the morning's service, which had been led by Phil and Rita Crofts. We had a good crowd in attendance not only from Underbank, but also from Sheffield's Upper Chapel, and other well-wishers, including members of June's family.*

*A few first-time visitors who attended our interfaith service previous to the lunch stayed on with us. They were very welcome.*

